

Pluralism

"Pluralism" denotes any metaphysical theory which claims that reality consists of a multiplicity of distinct, fundamental entities. The term was first used by Christian Wolff (1679-1754), and later popularized by William James in *The Will to Believe*. Pluralism is distinguished from both monism, the view that one kind of thing exists, and dualism, the view that two kinds of things exist. There are weak and strong forms of pluralism theories. The weak form holds that there are many distinct *individual* things, whereas the strong form holds that there are many distinct *kind* of things. Theories dealing with the number of entities are referred to as substantival, and theories dealing with the type of entities are referred to as attributive.

Theories of monism have varied greatly throughout the history of Western philosophy. In Presocratic Ionian philosophy, the universe is composed of the four primaries: air, water, fire, and earth. Thus, the origins of all things could be traced back to one or a combination of two or more of these primaries. Anaxagoras, however, held that the number of substances in the universe was infinitely great and cannot be numbered. Aristotle is sometimes classified as a pluralist given his view that reality is composed of individual substances (material objects with an essence). Leibniz held that all things are made up of monads, that is, elemental substances whose principal attribute is perception. They are infinite in number, and change according to their proximity with one another. As they perceive their neighboring monads, and change accordingly, they compose the things we use such as tables and chairs. Herbart described his ontology as a "pluralistic realism." This means that reality is made up of simple qualitative units for which he gave the name "reals." These join together in syntheses that lead to the world we perceive. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, William James explains pluralism in the world in terms of the dominance of external relations. James objected to monism on the grounds that it put too much emphasis on totality, and tended to exclude individuality and free will. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James associates his concept of pluralism with the dominance of external relationships in the world. Bertrand Russell's account of logical atomism was pluralistic insofar as it was founded on the "common sense belief that there are many separate things. Later abandoning the view of logical atomism, Russell still held to pluralism given his conviction that the universe lacked a continuity and orderliness.

Contrary to Russell, one difficulty with pluralistic theories is the fact that there seems to be an underlying coherence in the universe, which suggests that there is some single shared feature, perhaps as expressed in monistic theories. Without a point of commonality, things would be in complete chaos. Further, Ordinary language philosophers, such as G.E. Moore and Wittgenstein, argue that no categories of the understanding account for the real world, whether these categories are pluralistic, monistic, or dualistic. Instead, there are hundreds of boxes in which to classify things.